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SUBJECT: GERMANY WALKS TIGHTROPE BETWEEN CHINA AND THE
DALAI LAMA

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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) German Chancellor Merkel and the interior and foreign ministries have ruled out a boycott of the Olympics, but government reactions, along with that of the public, continue to be critical of China. Government statements and an April 3 special session of the German parliament on China's handling of demonstrations in Tibet reveal a predictably measured government response with some important nuances. On the one hand, the government is critical of the Chinese for their lack of transparency and heavy-handedness with ethnic minorities, but on the other hand, it rationalizes the Chinese government's response in light of domestic politics and the extreme actions of some Tibetan protestors. A planned May visit to Germany by the Dalai Lama and the question of his possible reception by EU foreign ministers will continue to complicate Germany's relations with China. End summary.

NO OLYMPIC BOYCOTT, BUT NO SENIOR OFFICIALS ATTENDING

¶2. (U) German Chancellor Angela Merkel continues to rule out a boycott of the Olympic Games in response to the Chinese government's handling of recent developments in Tibet (reftel) as do the foreign and interior ministers. Merkel maintains that the conflict should be resolved politically and that the Beijing Olympics present an opportunity to raise awareness about Chinese domestic development and its handling of ethnic minorities. On March 25, a Chancellery spokesperson repeated the necessity of direct talks between Beijing and the Dalai Lama and called on each party to approach the other side. According to an Emnid poll, more than fifty percent of Germans support a boycott of the Olympics and twenty percent are strictly against any German participation.

¶3. (U) As previously decided before the recent unrest in Tibet, no high-ranking German government official will attend the opening ceremony of the Olympics. (Note: Traditionally, the German Federal President attends the opening ceremony. President Koehler, whose daughter is blind, had already opted instead to attend the Special Olympics in September. End Note). Chancellor Merkel does not plan to travel to China until October 2008, to attend the EU-China summit. Interior/Sports Minister Wolfgang Schauble will visit China ten days after the Olympics have begun. A government spokesperson indicated on March 31 that the German ambassador to China, Michael Schaefer, may represent Germany at the

games. No German parliamentarian has yet advocated a boycott of the games, although several have argued to leave the option open should the situation in Tibet escalate (reftel). The March 24 announcement by the German Olympic Committee, stating outright there would be no boycott, was criticized by some German politicians as premature, given the uncertainty of further developments in Tibet.

STEINMEIER STRESSES END TO VIOLENCE, MORE TRANSPARENCY

14. (SBU) In a March 25 phone conversation with Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, German Foreign Minister Steinmeier called for an end to the violence in Tibet. This was Steinmeier's second phone conversation with his Chinese counterpart since March 16 (reftel). According to State Minister Gernot Erler, Steinmeier's call focused on three objectives: getting clarification of events on the ground, calling for an end to the 'information blockade' by the Chinese government, and urging 'full transparency' concerning the situation in Tibet.

PARLIAMENTARY HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE: SPECIAL TIBET SESSION

15. (SBU) The German parliament's human rights committee convened a special session on April 3 to discuss Tibet (Note: Th Bundestag was not in session during this time. En Note). State Minister Erler and Human Rights Commissioner Guenter Nooke and offered messages reflecting concern on behalf of the German government about the situation, but urged measured responses from both Germany and the EU.

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16. (SBU) In his assessment of the situation in Tibet, Erler characterized the Chinese government's reaction as "insecure" and mired in party politics. On the one hand, Erler said the Chinese leadership wanted to create a 'cautious opening' in dealing with the West, but on the other he said the GoC faced serious and threatening criticism from hard-line nationalists within the party. Erler welcomed the Chinese government's invitation to journalists and diplomats last week to tour Lhasa, calling it a "cautious success", but commented that this opportunity was undermined by how heavily the government stage-managed the visit. When questioned about the prospect of Foreign Minister Steinmeier supporting an invitation by EU foreign ministers to meet with the Dalai Lama, Erler was evasive and said he had not yet had a chance to discuss this with Steinmeier. Erler also expressed concern that the Dalai Lama's plan to visit Germany in May could potentially incite more disturbances in Tibet.

17. (SBU) Nooke struck a different tone in his assessment of developments in Tibet, expressing anger at the Chinese government's unwillingness to address the situation in the UN Human Rights Council. Commenting that it was a mistake to allow China to host the Olympic games, Nooke nonetheless opposed a boycott at this time. Nooke called on the international community to hold China accountable to the commitments it had made on human rights when it was given the opportunity to host the Olympics. He added that the German government is trying to organize a new round of talks on human rights, but he said it looked unlikely that this would take place before the Olympic games. (Note: The last round, scheduled for December, was cancelled. End Note). Nooke confirmed that he will meet with the Dalai Lama on May 18 in Nuerenberg.

DALAI LAMA IN DEUTSCHLAND AND GERMAN OFFICIALS IN CHINA

18. (U) The Dalai Lama's plans to visit Germany May 16-20 -

at the invitation of the German Tibet Initiative - remain in place, and may further complicate German-Chinese relations. According to MFA and other contacts, he will meet with the president of the German parliament, Norbert Lammert, Human Rights Commissioner Guenter Nooke, and the Minister-Presidents of Northrhine-Westfalia and Hesse, Juergen Ruettggers and Roland Koch, the latter being a long-time friend of the Dalai Lama. Chancellor Merkel will not meet with the Tibetan leader because she will be on official travel in Latin America at that time. Her spokesman has said that Merkel will meet the Dalai Lama again at a different time -- thus rejecting speculation that she would not meet with him because of the months-long fissure in Sino-German relations following her September 2007 meeting with him. It looks unlikely that FM Steinmeier will meet with him (see para 6), primarily because of his efforts in the past several months to restore German-Sino relations. According to the German Tibet Initiative, Steinmeier has 'not yet decided' whether or not to meet with the Dalai Lama. President Koehler has also apparently not yet responded to the invitation for a meeting.

¶9. (U) Meanwhile, German interest in the Tibetan situation remains extremely high, and various politicians have committed to trips to China and/or Tibet. Following a call by the German Tibet Initiative, over two hundred city halls (including those of Frankfurt/Main, Bremen, and Wiesbaden) flew the Tibetan flag on March 31 to protest China's policy toward Tibet. Frankfurt Mayor Petra Roth said that flying the Tibetan flag demonstrated opposition to what she described as 60 years of China's injustice toward Tibet. Roth will travel to China April 6-12 and intends to raise human rights violations in Tibet when she is there. Separately, Greens deputy caucus leader Jeurgin Trittin traveled to China March 30-April 4. Post will report any read-out of these trips septel. On April 3, the CDU Secretary General Ronald Pofalla issued a statement

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concerning the imprisonment of Chinese human rights activist Hu Jia, saying that allowing China to host the Olympics should not be a 'carte blanche' on their human rights record and demanded Hu's release.

COMMENT

¶10. (SBU) The German government continues to make efforts to deliver a balanced message on China and its handling of human

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rights and, in particular, its handling of ethnic minorities.

In his address to parliament on April 3, State Minister Erler characterized what had happened in Lhasa as a "pogrom" but also tried, diplomatically, to rationalize the Chinese government's response in the context of domestic (Chinese) politics. There are clearly differing assessments of the situation within the Foreign Ministry, evident in the two areas where State Minister Erler and Human Rights Commissioner Nooke diverged. On the justification for rejecting a boycott, Erler said it would send the wrong political signals, but Nooke stressed using the Olympics as an opportunity to raise criticism against China's human rights. As for the Dalai Lama's upcoming visit to Germany, Erler characterized it as a possible incitement to further unrest while Nooke welcomed it and reiterated his plans to meet with him. Discussion of a possible Olympics boycott is likely to continue, particularly among parliamentarians, in the wake of various German officials' visits to China this spring. As noted in reftel, this could engender divisions between the leading coalition parties - the CDU/CSU and the SPD - and further politicization of China policy for the sake of domestic German politics. End comment.

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